The Subject in Peril

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Abstract

What follows is an introduction to my forthcoming doctoral research regarding the portrayal of the subject and object of fear in road safety public education campaigns. The objective of this particular paper is to situate my doctoral research into current fear of crime theory. The paper aims to examine fear of crime beyond the heuristics of victimhood and asserts that the fearful subject’s perceived consequences of crime are also a significant consideration for the feared subject and their governance and regulation. The paper argues that the fear of crime features in road safety public education campaigns as a technology to discipline an unpredictable subject. The paper raises some significant questions relating to the exercise of this disciplinary power, which will form the basis of my doctoral research.

A Definition

The definition of the fear of crime is hotly debated within fear of crime literature and no single definitive meaning exists. Definitions range from the pragmatic² to the existential³. However, as Lee has asserted, the pursuit to answer a static questions like ‘What is the fear of crime?’ is largely obsolete (2007:204). Rather it is more prudent to look at the fear of crime through the lens of power relations (Lee and Farrall 2009:10) and ask more Foucauldian type questions like: How has the discourse of crime fear itself come to have power effects? How are these power effects able to be exercised? What are the consequences of the exercise of such power? (Lee 2007:203). I intend to employ such a lens throughout my research. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this paper a loose definition of the fear of crime will be practical. Consequently, the fear of crime can be understood as a physiological and emotional response (Fattah and Sacco 1989:207) towards symbols that a person associates with crime (Ferraro 1995:4). Fear of crime discourse largely concerns itself with the emotion of fear experienced by the potential victim, or fearful subject. Importantly, my research aims to examine fear beyond the heuristics of victimhood.

The Emotion of Fear

In their research, Farrall et al located five different emotional reactions to crime (2009:78–9). The first, and most fearful, is when a person realises that they are in a situation where victimisation is a very serious possibility. The second is a shock event that alerts a person to the fact that crime happens and that they are not immune from victimisation. The third is a nagging doubt about the security of one’s home, which leads to behaviour like locking doors and closing windows. This reaction reduces as a person habitually returns to find their home secure. The fourth is awareness that crime is a possibility and that extra precautions ought to be taken. The fifth, and least fearful, is a set of feelings that are orientated towards the problem of crime for society. These are separate emotionally from a person’s own experiences. Farrall et al’s continuum of feelings has two

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² Fear of crime is the negative emotional reaction generated by crime or associated symbols (Hale 1996:92).
³ '[n]o such objective thing actually exists' (Lee 2007:202).
distinct types of emotional reactions: one is expressive, like the latter three emotions on the continuum, and the other is experiential, like the first and second reactions (2009:79).

The onset of experiential fear relies on a dynamic interaction centred on subjective risk assessment. For Killias, fear is contingent on three interactive factors (1990:98). The first factor requires the individual to be exposed to a ‘risk’ that is more than trifling. This then combines with a sense of lack of ‘control’, where an individual detects they are without defence, protection or escape. The last factor in this interplay is the anticipation of ‘serious consequences’, should the risk come to pass. The resulting emotion is fear. Another group of authors created a psycho-social model of fear which proposes four different considerations that affect fear in an individual (van Der Wurff et al 1989:142–5).

The first aspect of the psycho-social model is ‘attractivity’. This is the extent to which people perceive themselves or their possessions as attractive targets for criminal activities. The second characteristic of the model is ‘evil intent’, which is the extent that a person attributes criminal intentions to another group or individual. The next feature of the model is ‘power’, which includes perceptions of an individual’s ‘own power’ and the ‘power of the other’. ‘Own power’ includes their degree of self-assurance and feelings of control over possible threats. ‘Power of the other’ would include considerations like strength, agility and resources. The final aspect of the psycho-social model is ‘criminalisable space’. This is an assessment of the probability of crime, based on the characteristics of a place, coupled with the time. This assessment may include lighting, the presence of passers-by and signs of disorder (van Der Wurff et al 1989:142–5).

Both of the models I have discussed have their strengths and weaknesses. Killias’s model suggests that a consideration of consequence is part of the generation of the fear emotion, whereas the psycho-social model does not consider this factor. However, the psycho-social model does provide a superior breakdown of risk analysis over Killias’s model. The psycho-social model implies that an individual considers their attractiveness as a target, the evil intent of the other and the space when assessing their risk of victimisation. Warr presents another model which introduces the idea that risk perception is dependent upon an individual’s sensitivity (1984:700).

Warr’s early research supported the theory that sensitivity is dependent upon the perceived seriousness of the victimisation and the perceived vulnerability of the individual. Warr concluded that fear levels are only high if sensitivity is high (1984:701). Warr later found empirical evidence that risk is also dependent on the perceived seriousness of the crime. From this additional evidence he was able to thoroughly develop his ‘sensitivity model of fear’:

The perceived seriousness of an offense affects fear by altering the functional relation between fear and perceived risk (i.e. sensitivity to risk). Sensitivity to risk in turn affects fear by determining the ‘output’ of fear produced by a given ‘input’ of perceived risk. (Warr 1987:40)

Using this theory it can be said that the more seriously an individual assesses a particular crime, the lower the level of perceived likelihood is required to stimulate fear.

Warr’s theory that perception of victimisation is predictive of levels of crime fear has been recently reconfirmed (Jackson 2010:10). Jackson goes further to suggest that perceived control over victimisation and the perceived consequence of victimisation also influence crime fear levels. Through a survey-based study Jackson located two distinct relationships between perceived control and perceived consequence. First, both are predictive of perceived likelihood and second, both moderate the relationship between perceived likelihood and worry about crime (Jackson 2010:9–10). This finding extends Warr’s sensitivity model of fear, showing that when an individual perceives a crime to be especially serious and when the individual perceives that they have little personal control over the victimisation, a lower level of perceived likelihood is needed to stimulate fear about crime (Jackson 2010:10). Effectively, individuals create their own subjective risk assessments, through a combination of perceived consequence, likelihood and control (Jackson 2010:10). In order to understand the nature of
these subjective risk assessments it is necessary to be mindful of the various factors that influence these perceptions.

The Correlates of Crime Fear

A wide range of theories gives regard to the correlates of crime fear. Farrall et al’s ‘unified framework of the fear of crime’ attributes merit to all of the pre-existing correlate theories, suggesting that they all interact together to cause crime fear (Farrall et al 2009:117–9). They acknowledge that previous victimisation and second-hand knowledge about crime both affect crime fear levels. They also see a relationship between neighbourhood decline, diversity and crime fear levels. Finally, they see merit in the idea that the urban middle class suffers from an ‘ontological anxiety’ that is easily translated into crime fear. I adopt the framework developed by Farrall et al accepting, however, that some features of the ‘unified framework’ may have more impact on crime fear than others. Nonetheless, this research is not concerned with testing which features are more convincing correlates of crime fear. What is important to note is that there exists a wide range of influences that affect the fearful’s assessment of potential victimisation.

Of particular interest to this research is this aspect of risk assessment that considers the potential consequences of crime, as featured in Jackson’s (2010) and Killias’s (1990) models. Also of interest is the assessment of evil intent as presented in the ‘psycho-social model of fear’ (van Der Wurff et al 1989). While further consideration of these concepts will be undertaken as part of this research, for the purposes of this paper the perceived consequences of crime can be understood as the fear of death (of yourself or another), fear of injury (of yourself or another), and the fear of loss (either personal or property). Another possible consideration concerning the consequences of crime is exposure, in some way or another, to the criminal justice system. This is, of course, less likely to be a consideration of the fearful subject (the victim) and more likely to be a consequence considered by the feared subject (the criminal). Fear of crime theory has previously given little regard to the feared subject, focusing instead on the fear associated with victimhood. I suggest that the perceived consequences associated with crime fear, namely the fear of death, injury and loss, is also a pertinent consideration for the feared subject and their governance and regulation.

The Fear of Crime as a Technology

The fear of crime is one governmental technology that regulates the behaviour of the subject. A hostile yet supportive relationship between governments and media organisations works to contextualise crime in a way that inspires fear (Green 2008:270; Farrall et al 2009:255). De-contextualised images of crime are presented to the public, persuading them to imagine themselves as potential victims (Lee 2007:188). The result is an employable fear of victimisation. The public’s fear of crime is susceptible to being deployed for political gain and amplified by the media (Lee 2001:482; Loo 2009:16). Media organisations tap into this fear of crime to secure an audience and gain advertising revenue (Lee 2007:167). Similarly, individuals and groups within government organisations can use this fear to secure political position and justify draconian legislative change (Muncie and McLaughlin 1996:55; Lee 2007:69). While these claims have their merits, what is of interest to this research is the manner in which the fear of crime, as a strategy, can regulate the population (Lee 2001:471; Weber and Lee 2009:65).

Foucault’s concept of biopolitics describes the increasing governmental concern for the wellbeing of the subject (1979:170). In an effort to achieve the best possible returns for their investment of power, governments draw on a combination of biopower and disciplinary power (Foucault 1991:95).

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4 A full examination of the range of these theories cannot be discussed here, but such a discussion will feature in the completed version of this research.

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University of Western Sydney as co-sponsors of the ANZCCC.
Disciplinary power is the disciplining of the self, whereby the self becomes the subject of its own government (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:134). Governments rely on technologies to exert such disciplinary power (Foucault 1991:95). These technologies ‘responsibilise’ citizens to manage themselves with a goal of producing ethical subjects (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:134–5).

The fear of crime is one such technology that encourages the subject to reduce their own risk of victimisation (Garland 1996:452; Lee 2007:141). Examples of this technology in use include: texts advocating movement and time restrictions for high-risk public spaces, and signs reminding drivers to lock their cars and take valuables with them (Garland 1996:452). Lee states that this type of communication paradoxically induces fear because the images and examples used are actually frightening (2007:149). Halsey goes further to suggest that such communication can contribute to the production of the crime it intends to reduce (2001:410). While these contradictions are worthy of consideration, the point to be elucidated here is that the intended purpose of this disciplinary technology is to transform the potential victim into an active and reflective subject, capable of taking responsibility for their own safety (Garland 1996:452). The expectation of this approach is that crime will reduce if the law-abiding subject modifies their behaviour in a way that decreases their risk of victimisation. This focus on crime control through the disciplining of the fearing subject is indicative of the heuristics of victimhood within fear of crime theory. The purpose of this research is to go beyond this boundary and posit the feared subject as an object of this same disciplinary technology.

A Dual Technology

The fear of crime is a technology that can regulate the behaviour of both the fearful and the feared subject. Like the fearful subject, this technology aims to transform the feared subject into an active and reflective body, with the objective of reducing crime and maintaining social order. This disciplinary technology is not exerted through force, but through visual images portrayed in the media.

In modern times, there has been an increase in the exercise of the fear of crime as a disciplinary technology via television advertising media. Interestingly, the featured crimes are not crimes that are traditionally the focus of fear of crime theory, like murder, rape and robbery. Rather, governmental media campaigns are primarily focused on traffic offending like speeding, drug and drink driving and failure to wear a seatbelt. Recent South Australian examples include: The ‘No Place to Race’ television campaign using the fear of death and injury to reduce ‘hoon’ driving crime; the ‘Creepers’ campaign using images of real life car crashes and (almost) subliminal flashes of a grim reaper–like character to reduce speeding; and the MA-rated seatbelt advertisement featuring a head collision between a boy without a seatbelt and the driver, accompanied by the following narration:

Like most victims, Julie knew her killer. It was her son, who wasn’t wearing his seatbelt. After crushing her to death, he sat back down. (Motor Accident Commission 2010)

Campaigns such as these use fear to reduce potential crime, not just by motivating the potential victim to reduce their risk, but also by motivating the criminal not to offend. The fear of punishment is rarely presented as the inspiration to modify behaviour, but rather the fear of death, injury or loss. Interestingly, these are the same considerations that are used to inspire behaviour change in the fearful. As such, modern governments are using the fear of death, injury and loss associated with crime as a technology to discipline both the ethical subject and the failed subject.

These considerations will be explored in detail in the final version of this thesis.
The Self and the Other

The two subjects central to this technology are the ethical Self and the failed Other. The Other is traditionally the object of fear and is perceived as the reckless, criminal, indecent and violent subject (Halsey 2001:413). The label varies from the Other to the Stranger (Merry 1981), the Deviant (Cohen 1972), the Outsider (Becker 1963) and, in more literary contexts, the Villain, but the meaning largely stays the same. The Other is juxtaposed to the Self, who is the good citizen; the disciplined and ethical subject; the honest, responsible and law-abiding majority. The Self interprets the action of Others as being safe or threatening in order to assess a level of safety (Warr 1990:892). This is not a careful, numeric assessment of probability and consequence but qualitative judgements like emotional feelings, imagery, assessment of control, familiarity and impact (Farrall et al 2009:15). A stranger is not perceived as having a personal history, reputation or location in social space. Only visual cues are read like age, sex, dress, ethnicity, and demeanour, which place a stranger in a social category associated with certain expected behaviours (Merry 1981:160). The problem with qualitative judgements of this nature is that we have limited information about strangers in order to make accurate assessments. The less contact an individual has with members of other groups, the less accurately the individual can predict their behaviour (Merry 1981:161). This unpredictability is how entire ethnicities and age groups become labelled as deviant or dangerous. The Self perceives dangerous persons as those who are unfamiliar and outside their predictable world. In a climate of crime fear and moral panic it is the stranger who is blamed (Merry 1981:165).

Moral panics like the fear of crime gain legitimacy by criminalising and exiling the Other (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994:31; Scraton 2007:233). The unpredictable and unknown stranger becomes a scapegoat or folk devil (Cohen 1972) and represents a visible symbol of what is wrong with society. The Other is labelled, marginalised and then excluded. For Becker (1963:9) this label is a social creation, which excludes through the creation of rules. Social groups, he argues, make rules whose infractions constitute deviance. Deviance is not a quality to be possessed but rather a label to be applied when rules are broken. Becker goes on to define deviance as ‘the product of a transaction that takes place between some social group and one who is viewed by that group as a rule-breaker’ (1963:10). Interestingly only one rule needs to be broken for the disciplined subject to label the Other as criminal (Becker 1963:33). If deviance is a label, and not a quality to be possessed, then who is the intended audience for crime control advertisements?

The Unpredictable Subject

Media advertisements are increasingly being utilised by governments as a way to reach out to their subjects. But which subject is the object of the television public education campaigns described above? Are the advertisements intended to promote desistance from the failed subject? Are they intended to strengthen the resolve of the law-abiding subject? Or are they intended to restrain the potential criminal who is an unpredictable subject? As Garland attests, any exercise of power relies on a knowledge of the subject, because ‘the more … [that] is known the more controllable … [the subject] becomes’ (1990:139). If we accept this view, what can be known of an unpredictable subject? If modern governments are exercising disciplinary power through technologies like crime control advertisements, but have no knowledge of the subject, then how can the unpredictable subject be made to conform? If the unpredictable subject cannot be transformed, then what is the purpose, and indeed the consequence, of this exercise of disciplinary power? These questions will be explored in my doctoral research, through a qualitative analysis of Australian and international television road safety campaigns.
References


